

ADDRESS

DELIVERED BY

NORMAN H. WHITE

Before the G. A. R. and the Citizens of

PLYMOUTH

ON THE NIGHT OF THE 100th ANNIVERSARY

OF THE BIRTH OF

ABRAHAM LINCOLN



Representative NORMAN H. WHITE

LINCOLN DAY ADDRESS

By NORMAN H. WHITE

Mr. Chairman and Citizens of Plymouth:

It is with a deep sense of the honor conferred upon me that I arise to address you to-night upon Abraham Lincoln, a man vilified and denounced in his life, but in his death, deified. In thus honoring me you impose a task of no small magnitude. It is not easy to pay fit homage to the man whose courage and ability preserved the integrity of these United States in the dark days of the Civil War.

Before me, as I speak, appears the ever-changing panorama of his life. I see the poverty of his youth; the log cabin wherein, by the red light of the fire, he read his Bible and his Milton and pursued his other studies. I see him as a lad walking miles to the home of some friend, from whom he borrowed books, and therewith furthered his educational desires. I see him as a soldier, a captain of volunteers, in the Black Hawk War; as a legislator in Illinois; as an attorney riding the county circuit. Later I see him as the opponent of the "Little Giant," Stephen Douglas, and still later the President of the United States. But the scene again changes. I see the interior of Ford's Theatre. There is commotion in the Presidential box. Booth leaps to the stage and disappears, while the President sinks back into the arms of his friends. The vision is not mine alone, it belongs to all. One has but to close his eyes and the panorama passes.

We have created a myth around Abraham Lincoln. We have likened him to the gods of Greek imagination, and by so doing have satisfied an innate need of human nature, apparent from the earliest centuries. But let me detach him from that myth for the moment and seek to reveal the wisdom, the purity and the greatness of the real Lincoln: a wisdom, a purity and a greatness acknowledged even during his lifetime, but not so generously acknowledged until after his death.

First of all Lincoln was a man. Many of his biographers have omitted what was not pretty. Others have apologized for it. He

was a great man. He reached as high as the saints in one direction and as high as Rabelais in another. He was a man of the prairie as well as a sage and martyr; both a deft politician and generous statesman. Following the real Lincoln, we realize the greatness of the man, and grandly we live. We breathe the air of the plains and the mountains. We recline amid poetic superstition and taste of the sanest wisdom. We witness the saving of a nation and the abolition of its greatest curse—slavery. What more can we desire?

Like Washington, he was bitterly criticised and his words treated with contempt. It was only the manner of his death that revealed the man; revealed him even before the grave closed over him. It was only then that the people realized his greatness and nobility. It forced itself upon the minds of all both here and abroad. Those that had scoffed united to praise, and from that day to this the tide of feeling then aroused has swept on. To-day we can hardly realize the attacks which he met, the assaults made upon him and the sore trials he endured.

His purpose was to save the Union. That purpose he accomplished. He freed the slaves and signed the death warrant of human slavery. Had he followed the advice of his critics he would probably have ruined the Union cause; but he knew the whole conditions where his critics knew only part, and, having the courage of his convictions, he fought on through the network of difficulties until success crowned his efforts—the Union was saved and slavery abolished.

From the very beginning of the settlement of this country the insidious growth of human bondage among the planters of the south kept pace with the fight for mere existence in the north. Virginia had received several cargoes of slaves before the Pilgrim Fathers had even attempted settlement in the town of Plymcuth.

The cold shores of New England, bordered with treacherous sands and slabs of granite, were never conducive to slave cultivation; but it is nevertheless true, that to quite a degree in our early times, the people coveted as a distinction the keeping of Indian or black slaves.

Jefferson's immortal Declaration of Independence awoke Europe and the American colonies alike to a correct appreciation of the inalienable rights of human beings. "All men are created equal," he said, "and they are endowed by the Creator with certain inalienable rights." And for nearly seventy-five years before the firing on Fort Sumpter these words stood out as a warning and

inspiration to the people of our country as they sank lower and lower into the mire of slavery.

As early as 1790 there were 40,000 slaves in New England, including New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania, and 659,000 in the southern land. The last Continental Congress, in 1787, which framed our present Constitution, made vain endeavors to restrict the slave trade in certain territories northwest of the Ohio river. Even at the time of framing the Constitution, Georgia and South Carolina boldly said, "No slave trade, no Union." And it was agreed that the basis of representation in Congress, and the basis of direct taxation, should be the entire free population of each state, with three-fifths of all other persons, meaning women and slaves. The north at this early period was unable to stand the slave strength in framing the Constitution.

Connecticut was a slave state as late as 1791. During 1786 George Washington wrote Lafayette, "Your late purchase of an estate in the colony of Cayenne, with a view to emancipate the slaves on it, is a generous and noble proof of your humanity. Would to God a like spirit might diffuse itself in the minds of the people of this country. Some petitions were presented in the last Assembly, at its last session, for the abolition of slavery, but they could scarcely obtain a reading."

Georgia and North Carolina gave the western portions of their lands to the Union on condition that they should become slave states. When that apparently bright day dawned, when Louisiana became a portion of the United States, it was only another dark day to those who wished to abolish slavery. The forest-covered and marvelously fertile southwest hungered for slaves. Even from the almost unknown Indian Territory came the cry of the enslaved blacks, carried thither from the rich corn growing lands of Maryland and Virginia.

Wealth! Wealth! Wealth! In a new country slave wealth and slave labor. Cotton ten cents a pound and slave hands one thousand dollars apiece, and in good seasons fifteen hundred each. Negro trading became profitable and the curse of the nation was upon us in leaps and bounds. Scarcely anyone stopped to think of the right or wrong of it. It was the custom and was the new southern country's source of wealth. It was sanctioned in the north and worshipped in the south. Ten dollars a pound was paid for the newly-born black, or seven-eighths white infant. No wonder slave breeding became profitable and popular. Slave girls were advertised to be sold on the block in New Orleans as being "edu-

cated, beautiful and nearly white." Such types were eagerly sought.

Thus in outline have I sketched some of the conditions of our country prior to the advent of Abraham Lincoln.

On February 12, 1809, there came into the world a small child, one who, like the Saviour, was destined to bear a cross and suffer for humanity's sake. This memorable event occurred in a small cabin in Kentucky more than a century ago. Here was born that patient and kindly spirit destined to lead his country from its bondage, as Moses, in days long gone by, led the children of Israel out of Egypt into the promised land. And as Moses was denied entry himself into this land, so was Abraham Lincoln denied the fruits of his endeavors. No simpler story of his life has ever been written than that told by himself, signed by himself, and handed down to posterity.

"I was born February 12th, 1809, in Hardin County, Kentucky. My parents were born in Virginia, of undistinguished families,—second families, perhaps, I should say. My mother, who died in my tenth year, was of a family of the name of Hanks, some of whom now reside in Adams, some others in Macon, Illinois. My paternal grandfather, Abraham Lincoln, emigrated from Rockingham County, Virginia, to Kentucky about 1781 or 1782, where a year or two later he was killed by Indians, not in battle, but by stealth, when he was laboring to open a farm in the forest. His ancestors, who were Quakers, went to Virginia from Berk's County, Pennsylvania. An effort to identify him with the New England family of the same name ended in nothing more definite than a similarity of Christian names in both families, such as Enoch, Levi, Mordecai, Solomon, Abraham and the like.

"My father, at the death of his father, was but six years of age, and grew up literally without education. He removed from Kentucky to what is now Spencer County, Indiana, in my eighth year. We reached our new home about the time the state came into the Union. It was a wild region, with many bears and other wild animals still in the woods. There I grew up. There were some schools, so-called, but no qualification was ever required of a teacher beyond 'readin', writin' and ciphering,' and the rule of three. If a straggler, supposed to understand Latin, happened to sojourn in the neighborhood, he was looked upon as a wizard. There was absolutely nothing to excite ambition for education. Of course, when I came of age I did not know much. Still, somehow, I could read and write and cipher to the rule of three, but that was all. I

have not been to school since. The little advance I now have upon this store of education I have picked up from time to time under the pressure of interest.

"I was raised to farm work, which I continued until I was twenty-two. At twenty-one I came to Illinois, and passed the first year in Macon County. Then I got to New Salem, at that time in Sangamon (now Menard) County, where I remained a year as sort of clerk in a store. Then came the Black Hawk War, and I was elected captain of volunteers,—a success which gave me more pleasure than any I have had since. I went the campaign, was elected, ran for the Legislature the same year (1832) and was beaten,—the only time I have been beaten by the people. The next and three succeeding biennial elections I was elected to the Legislature. I was not a candidate afterwards. During this legislative period I studied law and removed to Springfield to practice it in 1846. I was elected to the lower house of Congress,—was not a candidate for re-election. From 1849 to 1854, both inclusive, practiced law more arduously than ever before. Always a Whig in politics, and generally on the Whig electoral ticket, making active canvasses. I was losing interest in politics when the repeal of the Missouri Compromise aroused us again. What I have done since then is pretty well known."

This was the man destined to face the slave domination, which, like a canker, had been eating at the vitals of the body politic since long before the time of Washington. This boy of the forest, whose frail mother died upon a bed of skins and leaves, was ordained to bear the scorn and derision of many of his people, whom he most loved. Solemnly and quietly, with a tremendous desire to be known among his fellow-men, by dint of hard labor and concentrated effort, he rose through varying positions to his supreme power.

We find him as the "Village Wag," the street-corner orator, the captain in the Black Hawk War, the bankrupt store-keeper, the legislator, the lawyer, the member of Congress, the politician, the man who was offered the governorship of Oregon and the governorship of his adopted state, Illinois, the debater and the campaigner.

He oftentimes became morose and melancholy; and, disappointed in his first love affair, it was feared at one time he would lose his mind.

In the Illinois Legislature he first met Stephen Douglas, his rival in politics and love. In one of his letters, Lincoln referred

to him as "One of the least men" he had ever seen; but this "least man" was destined to be his chief opponent for more than twenty years. It was not until Lincoln became President that Douglas ceased to be his adversary. The debates and stump speeches which each of these noted men made are well known. Most of them are historical documents. But it was one calm, adroit question which Lincoln asked Douglas that eventually caused the latter's defeat.

Time is too limited to go into the details of Lincoln's political career. When he received the news of his election to the Presidency of the United States, his sad farewell to the people of his home town, Springfield, as he departed on the train, is one of his best speeches. Those he delivered en route to Washington clearly evidenced the stupendous burden he was bearing in his breast,—a burden, as he himself expressed it, "greater than that of George Washington."

On the 4th of March, 1861, sitting beside that old and gray-haired diplomat, Buchanan, Lincoln was driven to the Capitol building. There he took the oath of office delivered by Chief Justice Taney, who had rendered the Dred Scott decision, which Lincoln himself was soon to upset. It was a most momentous occasion in the history of these United States. "I, Abraham Lincoln, do solemnly swear that I will faithfully execute the office of President of the United States; and will, to the best of my ability, preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States."

His inaugural address on this occasion was long, direct and almost pathetic in its simplicity. Among other great things he said: "It follows from these views that no state upon its mere motion can lawfully get out of the Union; that resolves and ordinances to that effect are legally void; and that acts of violence within any state, or states, against the authority of the United States are insurrectionary or revolutionary, according to circumstances." Then later in his address he said: "In your hands, my dissatisfied fellow-countrymen, and not in mine, is the momentous issue of civil war. The government will not assail you. You can have no conflict without being yourselves the aggressors. You can have no oath registered in Heaven to destroy the government; while I shall have the most solemn one to preserve, protect and defend it. I am loath to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land will yet

swell the chorus of the Union when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature."

Scarcely had he closed his speech and entered the White House before he received pressing news that Fort Sumpter was in immediate danger of being fired upon and that reinforcements were necessary. He sent a force, but by his own acknowledged error, it was mis-directed and did not arrive at Fort Sumpter. This may have been wisdom on his part, or a divine act of Providence. The rebels fired upon Fort Sumpter and reduced it, because they realized its inadequate force for protection. Thus they fired the first shot and made the south the aggressor. Their act electrified the country, and, as in all such crisis, Lincoln was deluged with suggestions, advice and criticism. Abolitionists and believers in slavery, alike, heaped defamation upon this man, who held the safety of the nation in the palm of his hand.

At the beginning of the war the delay of the various generals in the prosecution of their work, the President's trouble with Mead and McClellan and other officers of high rank, are all too well known for further criticism. The war dragged on. One southern victory after another inflicted deadening losses on the Union cause, but the great mind and spirit of Abraham Lincoln viewed it all with calm serenity heretofore unknown in mankind. Patient, serene, sympathetic almost to a fault, he bore his tremendous burden year after year—a burden beyond the comprehension of us all.

Caesar was a merciless conqueror and sacrificed the lives of countless victims for the glory of conquering the world. Napoleon, the adopted son of France, rose to the dizzy heights of emperor, not for love of country, but for love of power. Lincoln, facing a greater problem than the world had ever known, and imbued with a spirit of tenderness, with the fortitude of a martyr, steered the "Ship of State" of a bewildered nation into its haven of refuge. Then, viewing the green shores of the promised land, he, like Moses, was destined by the will of God not to set foot therein. No character in history, from such an humble beginning, rose to such greatness, and yet his life throughout was chiefly marked for its simplicity.

At last, while the telegraph wires were still trembling with their burdens of victories, came the saddest hour that this fair land has ever known. Tired and worn, Lincoln had betaken himself to the playhouse with his friends, not for his own recreation, but to give pleasure to these friends. The story of that night is too well

known for rehearsal here. Lincoln's almost lifeless form was taken to an humble house across the street from the theatre on the evening of April 14, 1865. The next morning the soul of the great man had left his body and carried with it into the abyss of eternity the key to this nation's door which he had unlocked. Although he did not taste the sweets he had so zealously labored to establish, he had brought his people within the reach of the great boon sought.

Abraham Lincoln. What associations cluster about the name of this man of noble character; this man of gentle heart, who unweariedly devoted himself and his life to his country. His kindness and geniality are known in every household of this broad land, while to the world at large his name is a watchword and a tower of strength, around which men will rally for all centuries to come.

Before me there are the gray heads of men who first rallied to his call. No greater token of love for Abraham Lincoln is to be found than among the members of the Grand Army of the Republic. And it is my humble wish that in their declining years they may receive from the hand of Almighty God peace and happiness.

"We are coming, Father Abraham, three hundred thousand more,
From Mississippi's winding stream and from New England's shore.

You have called us and we're coming. By Richmond's bloody tide,
To lay us down for Freedom's sake, our brother's bones beside;

Six hundred thousand loyal men and true have gone before—
We are coming, Father Abraham, three hundred thousand more."

In the history of every nation there stands forth the memory of some one great man, whose character flashed upon us as a guiding beacon on life's voyage.

The radiance of the Christian spirit of Lincoln penetrated the history of our civilization. It will blaze the way for our future.

His steadfastness, loyalty and unfaltering Christian devotion to duty will be lasting examples of good, as long as nations shall exist. Men and women for centuries to come will take heart from his virtue and courage. The story of his life will be an invisible power for good among men of all creeds, all nations, and for all ages to come, emphasizing to each succeeding generation, that one race is the brother of all others, that freedom is a right from Heaven, and the spirit of Christ is the only enduring foundation of all nations.

The name of Lincoln is synonymous with manhood, purity, justice, courage, wisdom, patience and sympathy. Bearing the burdens of a nation, he knew the hopes and temptations of his children. Their anxieties were his anxieties; he bore them upon his shoulders. Their hatred towards him inspired but love for them. Their pain was his sorrow. Their safety his happiness. He bore their cross and died a martyr, saving a nation and teaching the world that "God is love."

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